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ABSTRACT

In a freshman composition course, the teacher attempted to motivate student interest in writing by assigning biographical readings and fiction that felt like real life. In reading the books, students found topics for writing about their own lives. During the first class session, students were given the topic "The Story of My Life: A Beginning" for a 10-minute free writing assignment. Students were assigned to revise the essays for discussion within writing groups during a subsequent class. Writers read their essays aloud, and other group members responded in writing, explaining: (1) what they liked best about the essay; (2) what was confusing or required more detail; and (3) what should be added, removed, or rearranged. The teacher also wrote comments on the papers. When the students got their papers back, some immediately began to pencil in ideas for further revision. A second "power writing" assignment drew similarly positive reactions from students. It became clear that when students write about themselves, they are more apt to use the course to refine their writing competencies. Furthermore, by paying attention to the details of their lives, students begin to define themselves and their philosophies of life. (An appendix of writing assignments and a 22-item bibliography of memoirs and autobiography are attached.) (SG)

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It can be so false, so wrong. That's the trouble. Even though we direct our theory and practice to the process of writing so we can guide students in the throes of creating, a problem remains. The product, the thing itself. Because they have been put through the paces of prewriting, drafting, shaping, rethinking and revising, and all sorts of editing, the finished product masquerades as a complete garment, one with sleeves, collar, buttons, even a pocket. Maybe the color is *de rigueur*, and even the shape and style are *au courant*. It may seem perfectly fine. But believe me, no student would be caught dead wearing these dreadful outfits. They make no claim on them at all because they are for manipulating only: cutting out, piecing together, handing in, getting a grade, and passing the course--a procession, if you will. That's all. Furthermore, by the time the process goes the full route including classmates and instructors, few of them find the limp things particularly memorable, either. They might not even make good rags. Still, I hoped for *haute couture*. And although I might not have arrived at the Paris version, the San Antonio version that finally evolved is quite satisfactory.

The change began in an unlikely manner courtesy of happenstance and perhaps a bit of magical serendipity. The research paper, the almighty bugaboo of high school seniors, was delayed to second semester that year so that Mothers' Day rather than the end of the year holidays would be my reading time. I got to thinking about all those Mother's Day cards I had made for my mother and my children had made for me and how we prized them. But term papers?

So I considered having students investigate what the world was like the day, week, or month they entered it. Immediate advantages were obvious: they might be intrigued about such a topic, library usage could become more thorough and perhaps more sophisticated, collaboration with classmates was possible, interviews with family and friends would pull in primary research, but, above all, they might care about what they were producing. Still, I had no idea it would be as successful as it was. The results were prized, which in some cases became Mother's Day presents

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for mothers who had not been paying close attention to worldly events with a new baby to welcome. And the voices that came from those studies were real voices, not some bogus scholarly stutter.

The process went immediately to the freshman composition course I taught at the local university. That was the beginning, one which suggested that enthusiasm might be infused into the entire semester of freshman writing, with true and genuine voices emanating from the papers as a result. Now all I had to do was figure out how to make it happen. With a semester of writing and more writing in addition to the research component, an entire wardrobe of essays in various modes and for multiple aims were required and created--and stuffed into closets, never again to see the light of day. Then it dawned on me who was supposed to wear those dreary duds. Me! Perhaps that was the important realization on the way to enlightenment. Since the writing was tailored according to my specifications and instructions and carried my labels, the grades, it stood to reason I was the one. The problem remained.

On the other hand, by using "real books" rather than textbooks we read about real people dealing with their lives. We read *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (Richard Rodriguez), *The House on Mango Street* (Sandra Cisneros), *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Maya Angelou), *The Woman Warrior* (Maxine Hong Kingston), plus individual essays from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Thoreau's *Journals*, and the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. We even delved into fiction that felt like a real life, *The Color Purple* (Alice Walker). Though not all these appeared in a single course or semester, I began to see that by struggling to tailor my choices to the students in class because I wanted them to get involved with the reading, I had fallen into autobiographies and memoirs. [A partial bibliography of memoirs and autobiography is appended at the end of this article.]

Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory* speaks so clearly to young people embarking upon their educations. The almost sparse but lyric style of Sandra Cisneros' *House on Mango Street* insists that readers see significant vignettes in their own lives. From the others they discovered how alike we are in vastly different circumstances. In these wonderful books the student writers found topics for writing about their own lives: a time you were ashamed of your

family (Rodriguez, Kingston), a time you had to wear something you hated (the beautiful new party dress and Cisneros' old brown and white saddle shoes), the strongest person in your family (Angelou's grandmother, Cisneros' papa, Walker's Celie, Kingston's mother), your name (Cisneros, Rodriguez, Angelou, Walker, Kingston), your credo (Rodriguez, Kingston). As the books celebrated and mourned significant events in the writers' lives, the student writing began to do the same thing. I found myself writing as energetically as those in my class because we were telling THE story, our story. And it was working. The voices coming from the pages became true and real, honest and authentic voices, and it didn't take long for them to get to that level. The story of Albert will illustrate.

Albert arrived that first Monday night flipping up sun glasses from his wire-framed round glasses. With dark, curly hair, an impish smile, happy demeanor, and those two round dark circles high on his forehead, he reminded me of Mickey Mouse. He sidled into the room, along the wall, and to the rear for a prized back seat. But he looked up eagerly when class began. That very first evening, after we introduced ourselves and got acquainted, I gave the class a topic for "Power Writing," a ten minute free writing that when done as a group does give power to the writer. I can feel the energy in the room, ideas ricocheting all over the place, and take advantage of the spirit myself. Few students, even that first time of spilling out ideas, get lost without something to write about. I gave this group the topic "The Story of My Life: A Beginning" since that is the title of the Freshman Composition Course, a course modeled on reading and writing memoirs. We all put pen to paper, write fast, and keep writing--even if we have to resort to Peter Elbow's "I can't think of what to say I can't think of what to say" to make the editor in our heads sit down and be quiet while we write. I could feel the excitement and wasn't surprised at the end of ten minutes when the thirty faces looked up expectantly. Only then did we read what we wrote and mark passages where we thought we had mined valuable ideas. The assignment for the following week was to take that Power Writing, revisit it, and arrange it in some way as a writing which could stand alone. The new version (with the original Power Writing attached) plus the assigned writing were the two to be brought to the class the next week and read to the writing groups formed that first night.

The following week with three questions on the board for the writing groups to use in responding *in writing* to each other's papers, the writers read aloud to their group and then wrote to each other. (1) What did you like best about this writing? (2) Where did you perhaps get confused or need more detail? (3) You may make one suggestion to the writer about revising which may have to do with a) putting something in, b) taking something out, or c) rearranging what is already there. Albert read this paper to his group:

I really can't think of where to begin with my own story, much less say it in ten short minutes. Life can get pretty complicated and there are too many things to say about mine. My biggest problem is my religious beliefs. I strongly believe in GOD, but I don't know what he (or she) is. I sometime believe my prayers are empty, but now I realize it's up to me to believe they're going somewhere.

My hobbies consist of one: MUSIC. I love it so much that sometimes I think I worship a false GOD, and forget the truth. My parents are two incomprehensible individuals, who have done an enormous amount for me. I hope I can pay them back.

I really don't know what else to say. I've revised my draft as much as I think it'll get. There wasn't really much worth saving. I don't mean to be negative, because I'm in school to learn how to write better. Hopefully this will happen soon. [Next to this paragraph, Albert had penned in: I realize I was being negative about myself, so I didn't read this to the group--I'm sorry I wrote it!]

The two people in his writing group commented as follows:

ANNE: I like your choices of words used in your writing. The way you describe your feeling or your knowledge of God is sincere and it helps the listeners to question more deeply on spiritual dimension. I didn't get confused anywhere, but I would like to hear some examples of what it is you are telling me.

LIZ: You have a good vocabulary--adjectives especially!! No problem in understanding you, but I think you might have misunderstood the assignment. In your introduction, you are almost apologizing for your life. Don't. We want to know about you--what you find boring we find interesting.

I gathered up the papers at the end of class and prepared for an interesting reading and getting to know this new group of students. The other paper, assigned to the narrative mode, dealt with readings by Maxine Hong Kingston, John Cheever, and Robert Hayden. The assignment said, "Writing #1: Narration--Tell a story about yourself and your mother or father. Make the significance clear, even though perhaps the event or occasion did not seem particularly important to you at the time." [Subsequent assignments tied to the rhetorical aims and modes are appended at the end of this article.]

Reading Albert's Power Writing, the original writing from which the writing above had come, I was thoroughly intrigued. This is what he had written in class that first night:

I really can't think of where to begin with my own story, much less spit it out in ten short minutes. Life can be complicated and there are too many things to think about, write about, and so on. My biggest problem is my beliefs. Since I'm kind of young, I really don't know what to accept and reject, for instance my religion. I'm Roman Catholic, and I believe very strongly in GOD-Jesus. I really have no earthly idea who he is or what he is, but I know something's out there. I know there's more to religion than empty prayers and songs, and I know it can't be figured out over night--I'm starting to think it can't be figured out at all. Enough about religion. Let's talk about my hobbies. I really like music, I love it so much that sometimes I'm afraid I worship it more than any religion. I think that's a problem. I'm really not built so sports isn't really for me. I'm a fast runner, but it doesn't matter when your opponent has longer legs and bigger steps or if he's shooting at you. I'm trying to get myself to like everything because I don't want to go through life hating everything--cause that's not much of a life. My handwriting is terrible. I hope she doesn't make us read this or I'll be stuttering. My parents are really two incomprehensive individuals. I only hope I can give my children the same things though (give--oops) as them they made what I am today--Well, maybe I should give myself credit. I really don't know what to say, I know the others probably have much, much more vivid ideas on their papers--goodbye!

Looking at Albert's revised writing, I could not believe the transformation. The poor, lifeless thing he had read to his group and handed in had lost a great deal in the translation to

formal writing. My response to him read as follows:

Now that some time has elapsed, go back to your initial writing (the Power Writing) and see that it gallops along inviting the reader to participate--where this one plods laboriously and is written according to the style which is supposed to impress a teacher. This teacher, however, likes the Power Writing. Go into more specific detail on music and you have it. Maybe leave your parents for later.

At the second class meeting, I handed back the papers. The students had already read the comments from the other members of their writing group the previous week before they stapled the comment pages onto their papers and handed them in, but now they reread their writing, with the insertion of time and distance between them and the throes of creating. Almost immediately many were penciling in some more ideas for revising. Perhaps my comments helped too, but mostly it was the personal view of the personal story, "The Story of My Life." Each week throughout the course they would be writing one new writing and one revised writing and reading them to their writing groups. The class had jumped into the spirit of the course immediately.

The Power Writing topic that second evening was similar to the first. On the board was an invitation to plumb the depths of memory for ten minutes with the topic, "I remember . . ." Albert pushed his pen furiously. Perhaps the suggestions on his first writing had been helpful, I mused. I noticed he kept writing for a short while after my watch signaled the ten minutes had passed.

Coming in to class the next week, he told me, "You're going to like what I have this week. It's good, I think." I couldn't wait to get to his paper. He was right. I was more than pleased when I read his paper:

I remember . . . my life as a high school freshman. I hated all things the upperclassmen said about me. Those days are gone.

I remember . . . the disco music playing on the radio. I hated hearing all those songs day in and out. Those same songs, I now love. They were pretty good and I miss them all.

I remember . . . when my mom had a '65 GT Mustang. It was a piece of junk then, but if only she would have kept it, I'd be in style today.

I remember . . . when I couldn't drive and I had to bum rides off my older friends or even worse, my parents. Thank God for the age of sixteen.

I remember . . . all the freshman and sophomore dances I went to. I looked so stupid. If only I could go back and be the person I am now, things would have been less painful.

I remember . . . the cartoons every Saturday morning. I'd watch them all the way till American Bandstand with Dick Clarke. Fat Albert was great!

I remember . . . the Alamo!

I remember . . . watching Saturday Night Fever after Grease! and wanting to be just like John Travolta. I would dance with my hand flaring up and down to the groovy beat of the Bee Gees.

I remember . . . things that my parents would tell me that were true, but I still didn't listen. There are too many to say.

I remember . . . that I still love GOD after the hard things I thought I would never get out of--like the Chem III final!

The writing groups responded for this second class meeting according to these topics: (1) State the subject of the writing, (2) State the main idea of the writing in a complete sentence, and (3) Tell what part of the writing speaks the strongest to you. Albert's group responded as follows:

ANNE: (1) The writing is about what you remembered in your previous years. (2) The main idea is that you regret some of the beautiful memories that are gone now and the happiness that you experienced in the past. (3) The writing that speaks strongest to me is that you are happy to be yourself now.

LIZ: (1) Reliving the high school and childhood memories. (2) You remember what went before with a sense of experience and maturity. (3) I liked your style of "remembering"--unique. I would like to read more.

Albert had become a poet. He had dared create a voice that pleased him and talked the way he wanted it to. I wrote "Elegant-- Wonderful-- It works! Also makes me want more." He

listened to his group, especially Liz, and returned to the Power Writing for what he had initially rejected. The final writing had the additions that follow. The first two became the beginning with the others inserted throughout:

I remember . . . when the days were all so easy, I'd come home from school, watch TV, and then go to sleep. Now I have to worry about insurance for the car, the car payment, the other bills, and my job. And most important-- college.

I remember . . . my eighth grade graduation and how grown-up I thought I was to enter high school.

I remember . . . when I thought I would never get out of high school and that all schools were just as boring as the one I went to. I guess I was wrong.

I remember . . . one of my great friends, who will forever be alive, but died on our high school graduation--car accident.

I remember . . . London and Paris--the beauty of other countries, and also New York and its concrete brilliance.

Albert had found his voice, and the freedom experienced in the personal writing subsequently was transposed to other writing, where he found he could create an authentic voice in more formal assignments too. Now he knew the secrets: 1) that writers write well when they care about the topic; 2) writers sound believable when they know their material and trust what they have to say; 3) and when writers combine caring and knowing, their readers hear a strong and true voice and listen with interest.

That is why I am now satisfied with what is happening in my Freshman Composition courses. When students write about themselves, a topic they know, they are more apt to use the course to refine their writing competencies, regardless of the mode of discourse. In addition, I think something else is happening at an important transition in their lives: by paying attention to the details they are defining themselves and their philosophy of life, something for which they appreciate extra time since they are working on that grand scheme anyway. These garments they will certainly try on and possibly even wear.

APPENDIX A

The writing assignments which follow are suggested by the readings from Life Studies: A Thematic Reader. 3rd edition, ed. David Cavitch. New York: St. Martin's Bedford Books, 1989 and from the teacher's edition which accompanies it. (4th edition just published)

Writing #2: Description (four possibilities)

1. Describe some natural phenomenon (past or present) -- a rainstorm, the sunrise or sunset, heat on San Antonio streets, wind blowing through a field, or something else. Be vivid in your description, telling also how this makes you feel and what significance it has for you.
2. Describe a favorite childhood place, one which perhaps seems very different now. (Things do change or perhaps it is we who change.) Tell how this place was and how it has changed. Discuss the changes and the possible reasons for them.
3. Describe your childhood house and/or your yard. What about them was most important to you then? Be sure to work with both the physical appearance and the meaning to you.
4. In most of our homes there was (or is) a particularly cherished item having to do with earlier generations or an important period in the family's past. It could be a lamp, Bible, an article of clothing or tableware, a personal possession. Usually it is a fairly ordinary thing but is treasured by the family because it holds certain ideals or memories. Write about that object, describing its physical appearance and the meaning it has.
5. Describe something in your earlier life that came to mind as you read "New Mexico" or "I'm Listening As Hard As I Can."

Writing #3: Comparison

1. When you were little were you often compared with other members of your family? With other classmates? With other friends or acquaintances? What was the comparison meant to show? How did you respond?
2. Write a comparison of yourself or some aspect of yourself to a non-human thing. Use this as a way to show something about yourself that might be more difficult another way.
3. Write about your heroes when you were little. How did you compare yourself to them? What was it they had or could do that particularly appealed to you?
4. How have you been surprised or disappointed when the thing you looked forward to and created in your mind was not what you imagined at all? Make sure you describe both the imagination and reality very clearly.
5. Compare two of your childhood friends, telling how they were alike and how different -- and most clearly, why that was or was not important to you.

Writing #4: Cause-Effect

1. Investigate the impact of one of the following on your life: the telephone, television, bicycle/tricycle, the washing machine, hair dryers. How did having this device change your life? How would your life have been without it?
2. Develop a writing using causal analysis and many examples on one of the following topics: learning to read, eating a healthful diet, watching television, attending church, participating in ethnic culture, learning an art or skill.
3. Do you remember when an action (or lack of action) caused you to be able to participate (or not) in a certain event or receive a particular reward?

4. Perhaps you were able to fix something broken or patch up a relationship. Look at the cause/effect relationship both in the breaking and the fixing.
5. Show the effects of some family crisis on your life.
6. Write about the causes and consequences of some decision made by you or your family
7. The effect of a relative, friend, acquaintance, or public figure on your life can be invigorating or devastating. Illustrate this.

Writing #5: Process Analysis

1. Talk about how you were able to get your parents to do what you wanted them to (not to punish you, buy you something you wanted, allow you extra privileges).
2. Think of a time you organized your friends into doing something they didn't want to do. What did you do to get them to do it?
3. Recall a hobby you had when you were younger. Describe the process in detail.
4. All neighborhoods have created "original" games. Talk about the one your neighborhood or your friends designed. Make sure to include all the steps.
5. Write a process analysis on how you broke a bad habit.
6. Discuss the process of preparing for a family celebration: wedding, vacation, graduation, birthday, other.

Writing #6: Definition Write a definition of memoir gleaned from each of the writers in Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir (Wm. Zinsser, ed., New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). They have similar ideas, of course, but also quite different ones of what a writer should do in collecting the story of his or her life. You also should have some ideas of your own by now. Combine all these and create an essay defining memoir writing, both from the published writers' point of view and your own.

Writing #6A: Extended Definition Making an abstract idea concrete: From Angelou's story of her eighth grade graduation in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, choose one of the following and define it according to the experiences in your own life: pride, courage, triumph, community, sensitivity, knowledge, nobility, loneliness, tragedy, dedication, authority, survival, hero, song, speech.

Writing #7 Illustration/Example

1. Choose one of the stories of your childhood and show how it taught you about life.
2. Illustrate what summer (or any other season) meant during a particular time in your childhood.
3. Take any of the following words and phrases and bring your reader to your early life with illustration and example: "funny," "picnic," "sports," "anger," "doing what I was told," "working hard," "running away from trouble," "taking it easy," "grandparents," "baby sisters/brothers."

Writing #8 Classification

1. Talk about your childhood world by classifying people in your neighborhood: best house to Trick-or-Treat on Halloween, the meanest man/woman in the area, the richest family/the poorest, the place of the best games, stories, etc.
2. What about your group of friends in the neighborhood or in elementary school: what characteristics from each of the members made up this perfect group? Who were the leaders, in charge of certain things? Why?

3. Bring your reader to your mind as a child and tell what were the best and what were less than the best in at least one of the following categories: TV programs, stories, games, meal, vacation, or others you would like to consider.
4. Being ashamed of your parents for a time is suffered by most people growing up. How did this happen to you? What did one or both of your parents do or neglect to do? What rules of behavior as you saw them did they break? It might be important to discuss how your standards were arrived at. Most importantly, how did you finally solve this problem?
5. Look at the code of manners and behavior that you followed at some point in your childhood. Then look at some friend or acquaintance who did not follow this code. What happened as a result?

Writing #9: Persuasion

1. Persuade your audience to read a book you found appealing, that was for a time your favorite reading. (You might want to include its main contrast or similarity with your life, how it might have stimulated dreams about yourself and your future.)
2. Persuade your audience to take up a sport or activity that you have found particularly valuable.
3. Argue that life today, particularly as regards a certain value which you name, is not the same as it used to be.
4. Argue that life today is better than it used to be.
5. Does family life encourage independence or dependence? Argue for one side or the other.
6. Are Americans more romantic or less romantic than they used to be? Use plenty of proof.
7. Argue that San Antonio (or any other place) is the best place to grow up in and have for a hometown.
8. Argue that a particular event or person in your life was crucial to your development.

APPENDIX B

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